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MODERN ART AND
THE THEATRE BY
SHELDON CHENEY



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MODERN ART AND THE THEATRE

Being Notes on Certain Approaches to a New Art of
the Stage, with Special Reference to Parallel
Developments in Painting, Sculpture
and the Other Arts

BY SHELDON CHENEY



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THAT becomes clearest, here at the beginning of what many of us believe to be a new slope, is this: the struggle is to free the theatre quite as completely as painting and sculpture from the centuries-old obsession with representation and imitation, to free it for creative expression; to find ways of escape from the sphere of sentiment, anecdote, plot-weaving and photography, into a sphere where beauty of form is locked with the release of the spirit. But before even starting on the search for means to this freedom, in order to clear the way, we must understand one thing as fundamental: there are expressive forms which pertain particularly and peculiarly to the theatre, and we can come at these only from a thorough consideration, and love, of the theatre as such. Certainly these forms are not likely to be discovered by casual invaders who think in terms of Cubist painting, or of free verse, or of a theory of gesture-and-music, but only by people who think in terms of the theatre, who create from visions of the theatre: stage and auditorium, movement and sound, light, color, humanity, acting, soul related to soul.

Most of the voluminous writing about "the new art of the theatre" is concerned with matters that ought now to be behind us. Twenty years ago it was important, in the

light of contemporary practice, that some artist discover "unity" as applied to stage production. Even five years ago the ways of achieving a "synthesis" of the component parts of stage art seemed the most pressing theatrical problem. There has been legitimate excitement, too, over the discovery that a stage setting should be of a piece with the play and the acting; that there should be in charge an artist-director capable of visualizing the production as one harmonious whole; that the actor should subordinate his personality under the demands of dramatist and director; that modern inventions in lighting have opened new possibilities of re-enforcing theatrically the dramatist's intent.

But these are truths relating properly to all production, and have no special relationship to a distinctively modern art of the theatre. What we should be trying today to discover on our stages, and to formulate in our writings, is not unity, or appropriate scenery, or ensemble acting, or synthetic production (though we should constantly keep all these things in mind), but a new conception of the relation between audience and play, new aesthetic forms to evoke the soul theatrically, new methods of widening the art of the stage out of the representative into a presentative medium.¹

¹ The term "presentational drama" was first put forward, I think, by Alexander Bakshy, to whom I am indebted in several such matters.

For centuries past drama has been concerned, first, with things material, with the objects, relationships and problems of life as commonly lived, on the flat plane of outward reality, relieved only by an appeal to the most obvious emotions; second, with things romantic — that is, with flights into regions of sentimental melodrama, designed not to attain to the spirit but as an escape from life; third (and less often), with things of the mind, moving cleverly in that dry intellectual region which, in an emotionally sterile age, has been the somewhat snobbish refuge of “cultured” folk; fourth, more rarely and more happily, since it implies an approach to aesthetic enjoyment, with things that stir the surface senses. But there is a faculty that almost never has been touched by this drama, a faculty that lies beyond the senses, the mind and the outward emotions. It is perhaps the soul of man; it may be approached in two ways, religious and aesthetic; and its response is ecstasy.

With these truths in mind I discard all the older definitions of drama. I will remember only that drama is spirit ← speaking to spirit. That is my starting-point.

It is a question whether absolute abstraction is not a will-o'-the-wisp, whether in any work of art (even musical?) the associative processes of memory and recognition ← are not indissolubly bound up, at least faintly, with

aesthetic enjoyment; but the general trend of modern art is unmistakably toward abstract or non-representative means. In the theatre there are these parallels: the use of the mask in acting, or better still the actor's consciousness of his body and face as an emotional mask; the use of words not only literally but tonally, musically; the use of line and color in the background for emotional re-enforcement, without purpose to imitate actuality or suggest reality; and a frankly theatrical approach, abandonment of any effort at illusion. But absolute abstraction would bring the wordless stage, marionettes, and movement instead of story – in a wide sense a negation of drama.

The new theatre will break cleanly from the picture-frame stage of the Nineteenth Century realists, with its peep-hole view of life, its effort to afford the illusion of looking at a natural and existent series of events. The new theatre will instead be frankly theatrical, it will not hesitate to distort reality, it will subordinate the literary element, the pictorial element, the personal element, to the "show" element, the flow of setting, acting, lights, words, feeling. Instead of edging closer and closer to the normal, natural course of life, it will depart frankly from the natural, to present a view of life that is condensed, microcosmic, tacitly formalized within stage conventions. This implies a setting that makes no pretense of actual-

ly being a room or a market-place or a forest, rather a setting that is confessedly a stage, a platform with such surroundings as are necessary devised in the spirit of the action; it implies actors who appear frankly as actors in a show (a convention which, rightly projected, may sweep along an audience with far surer abandon than is possible through imitative acting); it implies a dramatist conscious of the theatre as a medium, not so much concerned with overcoming the playhouse's limitations in representing bits of life, as capable of using its every limitation and its every potentiality to intensify theatric and emotional effect, to present life compressed, distorted, shaped into a performance.

The tendency for centuries has been to bring the play closer and closer to outward reality, to confine it more and more narrowly to the plane of what people might do in actual life. This being so, the stage, from being in the center of the audience, and later a platform jutting into the audience-chamber; was gradually pushed back until it disappeared in a space where the actor could be surrounded by the physically real walls and properties of the off-the-stage world. Then when a frame was put at the space's front edge, and a curtain dropped in order to lift suddenly on a completely imitative picture of natural life (the modern realistic setting), the illusion was as complete

as mechanics and photographic-minded gentlemen could make it. But honest art had flown out the all-too-practicable window. The first step is to sweep out the accumulated machinery, real-life properties and trick illusions of the realists, and find again the naked stage. Having rediscovered the platform for our exhibitions we may or may not build aprons, or take again the orchestra circle for our performers; but at least we shall no longer be experimenting within a limiting frame designed tightly for a highly specialized form of photographic staging.

Only from this naked stage can we build the new drama; and the process of creating it demands a similar sweeping-out of accumulated trickeries and limitations in the playwriting technique. Dramatists must refuse longer to be bound by the supposed necessity of holding their characters and action within the limits of what might probably and naturally happen in the world as we usually know it; they must feel free to violate any three-act or five-act formula, or any technical limitation of three settings or five or twenty; they must understand that it is man's soul and man's emotions that they deal with, and that so long as they project these in action, it makes no difference whether they violate the appearance of reality, the limits of the realistic stage, or the rules of current playwriting practice. The actor on this new stage, too, that he may be worthy, must drop off a dead weight of

lifeless tradition and false training. He must become impersonal in order that he may be universal, that he may impersonate all persons. He must return to the ideal of the mask – an artist's plastic rendering of the emotion that is to be expressed. Acting need not be natural, should not be imitative, must be designed, controlled, alight again with "a noble artificiality" – rhythmic and expressive.

The older theatre has become hardly more than a place where literature and photography have formed a sterile union, and they have hidden the real stage. To progress we must first of all turn back in these several ways to the theatre undisguised – and then devise and present works of pure theatric creation.

Even while constantly emphasizing the medium of the theatre as such, I wish not to overlook the close connection between progress on the stage and progress in the painter's studio. What, essentially, is the thing that is generally called "modern art"? In its negative aspect it is a revolt against the representative basis in painting, against descriptive painting, illustrative painting, against correct drawing and coloring as the prime and indispensable conditions of art, against the camera-eye in the artist. In its constructive aspect it is creation as contrasted with imitation, expression as contrasted with representation. It is

concerned not with outward appearances and their literal or impressionistic transcription, nor with technical brilliancy and ornament; but with the rhythm or essential reality or structural truth of nature, with its living soul, and then with the artist's emotion and his individual emotional way of conveying what he has felt or divined.

For five hundred years the painter busied himself copying nature and gaining proficiency in "fine painting". But the Expressionist may conceivably have no more than a primitive knowledge of anatomical drawing, perspective and the other "essentials" taught at the art schools, and no talent at all for "finish," ornament and flourish; and yet, if he apprehends something of the universal truth in a blade of grass or a human body or a battle, or in some bodyless thing that lives only within himself, if he experiences an aesthetic emotion over one of these things, and conveys that emotion through the forms peculiar to his art (be they like or entirely unlike nature), then he will gain what the putterers with nature and fine painting have lost from their art — emotional validity, inspiration, living beauty.

The idea is not new, in that there have been times when artists set expression above representation, emotion above observation, feeling above technical display. But it is revolutionary in that it runs counter to the whole "normal" course of painting, sculpture and architecture over

a period of five hundred years or more. It is revolutionary to the extent of overturning our whole bourgeois culture's theory of the aims of art and the mode of apprehending and appreciating it.

Likewise in the theatre there have been periods when the art of the stage was presentative instead of representative, frankly theatrical instead of illusional, expressional in the widest sense. But here too for several centuries the literalists have had their way, and bourgeois culture is entrenched – so that a no less revolutionary change is necessary.

Once we understand what is meant by "Expressionism," and that it is in a sense an expressionist revolution that is stirring in the theatre, we may immediately clarify our way by turning aside certain currents which have served to muddy the stream of modern art, both inside and outside the playhouse. These currents are realism, romanticism, symbolism and mysticism, and we must cut them off clean.

As to realism, there may be those who understand by the term an effort to reach down through life to the essential reality of things – and that would be an approach to Expressionism; but the great majority of critics and readers regard it as pre-occupation with the outward, the commonplace aspects of life, as emphasis on the photographic,

the surface detail, the casually effective, the minutely observed, rather than the spiritual meaning, the emotional content – and so we must turn from realism.

Romanticism is at the far pole from what we are after because it is designed to take the spectator away from life into a world of sentimental adventure – a weak escape from living – and because, as practiced, it is nine-tenths bombast, hero-worship and glamour.

If mysticism is the constant struggle to pierce behind those veils that hide us into the petty world as it accidentally is, then the new theatre cannot get on without mysticism; but the new slope does not lie in the direction of that other mysticism, the generally accepted sort, that plays prettily with the veils that hide the heart of life. We have had enough of high priests and mystagogues, and of dimness for its own sake. Nor does it lie in the direction of that symbolism which delights in baiting the spectator's mind with double entendre or with placing one concept to suggest another. For this too is merely a sort of intellectual jugglery, on the material or realistic plane.

It lies rather in the direction of abstraction, of stark expression, not with symbols or illusory veils, but with emotional reality intensified through all the means that are the theatre's.

The easiest forms of drama to identify as "new," and as paralleling in some measure modern progress in painting and sculpture, are those sometimes grouped under the term "aesthetic drama," comprising the wordless forms. They are primarily sensuous in appeal; they tend, as Walter Pater first put it, constantly toward the estate of music; they minimize the intellectual element; they swing away from literature toward music and color.

Certain forms of dance-drama, culminating in recent creations of Diaghileff's Russian Ballet, are examples. Aside from the conjunction with music and the dependence upon emotional as against imitative use of line and color in the backgrounds, both tremendous urges to the imagination and senses, there is the central emphasis on movement instead of story — and movement in the best modern dancing is abstract, expressive.

Here, then, is one of the things we are after: a typically and frankly theatric art, inclining toward abstract means, presentative of emotion and rhythm rather than imitative of outward aspects of life, carrying the spectator certainly into an ecstasy of the senses. And yet, when all is said and done, this very fascinating thing seems to me to lack something of the finest nobility of which the theatre is capable. It tends too far toward music and dancing as such — there is some wider and finer implication in the word "drama" which it has missed. It is magnificent; but like

most magnificent buildings or paintings or sculptures, it is just a little empty – spiritually. So too with the so-called mimo-drama, of which we Americans have seen so little aside from “Sumurun”. And the art of mobile color, stupendous new art that it will be, comes to mind also; but I feel that it is hardly more typically of the theatre than music alone, or moving pictures: its alliance is with the theatre as a gathering-place and not with the theatre as an art medium. Of marionettes I shall be comparatively silent also, for another reason. There is a greater artist experimenting there, and he has yet to speak. When he does we are promised still other beauties, which may escape from the realm of the sensuous into spiritual realms as yet unexplored by Western civilizations.

But I repeat, the sensuous theatre is not all the theatre; at the moment I doubt whether its half will ever be more than a minor half. The theatre with literary attributes, the theatre using words as one of its media, still holds the larger spiritual promise.

A great deal of literature (including practically all the great division called fiction) gives pleasure only by evoking the associative processes of the mind. But there is literature that carries the reader to a sort of ecstasy, by means of a formal beauty of its own, something resident in its method of unfolding its story or idea; and it is only

this sort that has aesthetic validity, or that can be integral to any art of the theatre. Most of the world's drama for many centuries has been predominantly literary; and since the naturalistic era set in, it has been of the shallow fiction type, without any formal beauty – journalistic, literal, entirely unimaginative. It is this condition that recently has brought discredit not only on the current realistic theatre, but to some extent on all dramatic experiment unless it emphasized visual and sensuous as against literary elements.

In certain types of stage exhibition, however, the artist's expression of emotion can be carried to its highest intensity only by the use of spoken words. In this drama the characteristic form – the element corresponding to the "significant form" or formal beauty which is the essential mark of creative painting, sculpture or architecture – is no closer to the sense-impressive form that underlies music than to the formal element, say, of epic poetry. It must, in the nature of the inclusive theatre medium, overlap these other distinctive or essential attributes, of the visual and aural as well as the written arts.

I do not pretend to be able to define it; but I believe that these elements enter into its effectiveness in reaching the spectator's consciousness: some sort of crescendo (?) form of action or story, words used tonally as well as literally, re-enforcement of mood by designed lighting, back-

ground, movement and color, and acting that is less personal than character-revealing. Beyond these there is some all-over, conditioning theatrical attribute in the nature of an unfolding rhythm.

A distinguishing feature here – I am anxious not to evade it, as so many commentators and workers have – is reliance on story-development or character-development. But this need not be plot for its own sake, as the short-story writers use it. It should rather be the play of divinity shaping a sequence of events, soul gradually brought to soul before our eyes, a reflection in unfolding action of the universal relating rhythm. It may be hardly more than a loose arrangement of improvisations on a certain theme, or it may move as swiftly and inevitably as a Greek tragedy, but the flow, the disposition of events, the unrolling, is of its essential character. We are dealing with a time art, and it is precisely because words are the most expeditious aid to unfolding the relationships of humanity, because they hasten the emotional action, that they become here a legitimate dramatic means.

This does not necessarily bring us back to either literary drama in the “closet” sense or realistic word-drama. For even in this field there are escapes from the obsession with surface aspects of life, and from a purely literal or ornamental use of language. Regarding the latter, I recognize that we now use far too many words to represent

any given idea; that we might play silences against words as we practically never do; that we make almost nothing of the tunes of speech, which should, perhaps, afford us more than half our gain out of words. The playwright should compose tonally as well as literally, with musical structure underlying.

One of the ways out of our present obsession with the obvious and the imitative, I think, lies in the development of drama on varying planes of consciousness, the enrichment of the play by approaching life concurrently from other planes than the obvious seeable one. I want to say more of this, because it is here if anywhere that I have worked independently, without reference to existent theories or practice.

It is clear that a picture, once it has cast loose from the photographic limitation, will gain if it multiplies the characteristic aspects or attributes of a subject, so far as these can be made to serve, by repetition, as intensifications of the artist's emotion. Why not similarly, on the stage, intensify the original emotion by multiplying the planes of action, by showing forth the action as seen from varying points of view on planes beyond the one usually understood (which is life as seen by the neighbors, or the playwright)? The spectators ordinarily begin to see the play through the eyes of the dramatist (however "natural" the

setting may be), and they continue to fall back to the dramatist's viewpoint as often as the action fails to hold them in the illusion of reality (and the failure of realism has come with the realization that the illusion cannot be long sustained – that there is no such thing as a perfect imitation, that the audience lapses inevitably between the high points of “living” certain situations). It would be better if the audience understood from the start that this is not actual life as seen through a dramatic observer, or life as seen by themselves through a lifted fourth-wall, but frankly a show presented by actors and artists; that they are not participants in the simulated action, but on a plane (with the actors) above the action, from which they can understand it and, giving up to the convention, feel it theatrically even more poignantly than in the realistic illusion. And it would be better still if this show, now become their show, kindled their consciousness through a presentation of events and possibilities not only of their “normal” limited life, but also of life as viewed from the planes of their Gods, of their spiritual perceptions, of their thoughts that are too sacred for ordinary speech, of their dreams and divinations.

In such a production the dramatist has got outside the play, has in a sense disappeared in the audience, instead of standing between the audience and the play; the actors have become its priests, and if they are passionate enough,

every spectator will be lifted to that exaltation, to that spiritual ecstasy, which has been lost from our audience-chambers ever since the drama became representative; and by so much as the story is illumined from planes nearer to the pure spirit, by that much will the play transcend ordinary experience and ordinary drama.

It is one of the paradoxes of recent drama that the realistic playwright, while pretending to widen the experience of the average spectator by taking him into the playhouse to live dramatic situations vicariously, has actually narrowed down the field of experience to something far less stirring than life and far less beautiful. For all of us, though the neighbors seldom know it, experience continually feelings and adventures beyond the plane of life as outwardly observed: miracles, intimations of immortality, dreams, ecstasies of love, mental ironies, flashes from a region of absolute justice – all of which the current drama, generally speaking, overlooks. It exists on one plane; but it is rather ordinary life illumined from the planes of miracles, of dreams, of spirit consciousness, of apprehended divinity, that should be the raw material of drama. We acknowledge a God in church, and aside from any question of a God's existence or non-existence, we have immensely widened our spiritual experience thereby, and found ecstasy again and again. I want the same freedom for the theatre, the same open theatrical approach, and I think that in a

drama of intersecting planes we shall find one road to it.

Such a multiple method has occasionally been used as a trick, in "dream plays," plays within plays, etc., but in them the planes seldom illumine each other. Mr. Shaw and Mr. Kennedy come closer to the idea, sometimes playing off the intellectual against the emotional plane very cleverly, but in general the intellectual dryness prevails in their works. Yeats, Dreiser, Maeterlinck and others strike toward the idea at varying angles. But nearest to what I have in mind, technically, is Eleanor Gates' "The Poor Little Rich Girl". The device here is obvious: a story on the plane of delirium woven into a story of normal everyday life; but the method of making the two stories integral, of heightening the emotion posited in the first act by identifying the characters and motives with those of another story in the second act, and shadowing through the first at intervals, links definitely with a drama of crossing planes.

But why not, without the material excuse of delirium, depend our drama not only from two intersecting planes of consciousness but from many? Why not cast loose, consciously, from the material conventions that bind us here below in non-drama, and dramatize freely, arbitrarily, God-like, every emotion, every spiritual force, every planetary relationship which we can apprehend – lighting the plane we ordinarily call life concurrently or successively from as many others as will help to release and intensify

emotion, truth, spirit? Theatricality, the fact that this is drama, not life, is excuse enough, if any were needed, for abandoning actuality, for violating appearances.

To suggest an example: there is a plane of outward relationships, relieved by the more obvious emotions, the plane of what we ordinarily do and say conventionally; there is a plane of what we think (while saying something tangent), the plane of our mental habit; there is a plane of perception, flashes of intuition, the real self revealed despite inhibitions of training, environment and fear; there is a plane of the Gods we have created, Gods we have endowed with a little better than human attributes; there is (I believe and as a dramatist have a right to project my belief in living action on a stage) a plane of pure spirit of which we have many intimations but no material knowledge; there is perhaps beyond that a plane of God himself unrevealed. How many times such a series of planes cross in the life of any one of us in a single day, one can only conjecture. The realist practically limits himself to the first plane; but knowing as we do that even a single sudden flash from one of these other planes, intuitively thrown in, may be the most poignant, the most revealing, the most dramatic moment in a realistic play, may we not wisely widen the range of our drama to project freely from any or all so far as they serve to intensify emotion?

I might put down here, from notes made before and

during the process of evolving something approaching a theory, many more groups of planes and sets of relationships, each affording wide theatric possibilities in combination; I might also trace a parallel to certain phases of modern painting, Cubism, Futurism, etc., parallels to multiplied vision, simultaneous recording of successive aspects, interpenetration of objects, imagined or remembered planes projected and intersecting, etc.; but I do not wish to set down now more than this brief suggestion.

But I do believe this: somewhere in these still evolving ideas there is a new art of the theatre which will in some sense correspond to the best that has come out of Cubism and Futurism in painting and sculpture. Certainly a study of the matter cannot do less for the playwright than widen his conception of his materials and his duty toward his audience spiritually. If a drama of too visibly intersecting planes, a too mechanical use of the idea, should develop, I could only hope that it would be followed for its own sake until the effects ran dry, and then go out as Cubism has gone out, leaving all drama enriched with a deeper sense of the importance of revealing the spirit, a new freedom in the range of dramatic material, a new intensity of emotion gained by working on varied planes (fused on the always-understood theatric plane) – but a drama in which the intersections as such were no longer noticeable.

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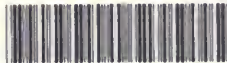
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